

What is claimed is:

1. A region-wide messaging system, comprising:
 - a. a data network using at least one data protocol to transmit messages through the data network;
 - b. a first communications network having multiple network elements and which couples to the data network, the first communications network including a first messaging server that is adapted to
 - (i) operate as a network element within the first communications network and
 - (ii) transmit a message using the data protocol from the first messaging server to the data network; and
 - c. a second messaging server that is adapted to
 - (i) operate as a network element within either the first communications network or within a second communications network located in a different geographical area from the first communications network and
 - (ii) transmit a message transmitting via the data protocol from the first messaging server to the data network.
2. The region-wide messaging system of claim 1, further comprising a directory server coupled to the data network and adapted to communicate with the first messaging server in order to obtain an address from the directory for delivery of the message and to use the address obtained from the directory to deliver the message to the second messaging server.
3. The region-wide messaging system of claim 2, further comprising a workstation adapted to validate whether the message may be transmitted from the first messaging server to the second messaging server.
4. The region wide messaging system of claim 3, in which the workstation comprises the directory server.

5. A regional messaging system adapted for deployment over a communications network, the system comprising at least two voice mail platforms provided with AIN functionality and configured to act as intelligent peripherals within the communications network, whereby communications routed to either of the two voice mail platforms are controlled by elements of the communications network.

6. A method for sending and receiving a voice mail message, the method comprising:

- a. providing a data network using at least one standard protocol to transmit messages through the data network;
- b. coupling to the data network a plurality of voice mail servers;
- c. causing, in response to a user's request to initiate a message, a first voice mail server to query a directory for information associated with the message destination provided by the user;
- d. returning at least routing information from the directory so that the first voice mail server can route the message to a second voice mail server associated with the destination provided by the user.

7. A method according to claim 6 in which each of the plurality of voice mail servers are further adapted to serve as network elements within a first communications network, whereby a control element within the communications network is capable of controlling the processing of calls directed to or initiated at the voice mail servers.

8. A method according to claim 7 further comprising the step of validating whether the user may initiate the message.

9. In a messaging system including a data network using at least one standard protocol to transmit messages through the data network, the messaging system used for delivery of at least voice mail messages and comprising:

a. a telecommunications network operative to receive a voice mail message in a standard protocol of the data network from the data network and to deliver the voice mail message to a voice mail server; and

b. the voice mail server operative to receive the voice mail message from the telecommunications network and to make the voice mail message available for retrieval.

10. The system of claim 9, wherein the telecommunications network is operative to deliver the voice mail message in the standard protocol to the voice mail server.

11. The system of claim 10, further comprising a directory functionally connected to the telecommunications network; and

wherein the telecommunications network is operative in response to receipt of the voice mail message in the standard protocol from the data network to obtain an address from the directory for delivery of the voice mail message and to use the address obtained from the directory to deliver the voice mail message to the voice mail server.

12. The system of claim 11, wherein the voice mail server is operative to deliver the voice mail message in the standard protocol to the telecommunications network.

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13. A method for validating messaging transactions between customers served by voice mail servers located in different geographic regions, operated by different service providers or both, the method comprising:

a. querying at least one directory in order to identify a first voice mail server associated with a caller originating a message and a second voice mail server associated with the recipient of the message; and

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b. determining, based on the identities of the first and second voice mail servers, whether the message may be transferred between the first and second voice mail servers.

14. A method according to claim 13 wherein the querying step involves using the identities of the first and second voice mail servers to determine (i) their locations, (ii) the identity of the one or more service provider(s) operating the first or second voice mail server or (iii) both the locations of the first and second voice mail servers and the identity of the one or more service provider(s) operating the first or second voice mail servers.

15. A method according to claim 14 wherein the querying step is performed by providing a database with at least the message recipient's telephone number correlated to at least the identities of one of the first or second voice mail services.

16. A method according to claim 14 wherein the providing step is implemented by formulating a query to the database and transmitting the query over a network.

17. A method according to claim 16 wherein the determining step involves using the locations of the first or second voice mail server to determine whether applicable regulatory rules allow message transactions between those locations.

18. A method according to claim 15 wherein the determining step involves determining whether the message transaction may proceed if the identities of the service providers operating the first and second voice mail servers are different.

20. A process for determining the identity of a first voice mail server associated with an originating caller that has left a message with a second voice

mail server associated with a receiving caller that may seek to respond to the message, the process comprising:

ascertaining an identifier associated with the originating caller;

using the identifier to determine an identity code that identifies the first VMS and correlates with the identifier;

associating the first voice mail server's identity code with information selected from the group consisting of: the location of the first voice mail server, the identity of a first service provider operating the first voice mail server, and the existence of agreements between the first service provider and other service providers; and

determining whether the receiving caller may communicate with the first voice mail server in response to the message.

21. A method for validating the passage of data between customers of different companies operating messaging servers that serve different areas, the method comprising using business rules, regulatory rules or both to determine whether the data may be passed between the customers' messaging servers.

22. A method according to claim 21 further comprising the step of identifying the voice mail servers involved in the passage of the data.

23. A method according to claim 22 further comprising using the identities of the voice mail servers to determine their respective locations, their respective operating service providers or both.

24. A method according to claim 23 further comprising the step of applying regulatory rules to determine whether the data may be passed between the identified voice mail servers.

25. A method according to claim 24 further comprising the step of determining whether the operating service providers will accept data from one another.

26. A method according to claim 25 further comprising the step of confirming to the customer the destination of the data or message.

27. A method according to claim 21 further comprising the step of out-dialing a telephone call to a person not subscribing to regional messaging services in order to deliver a message.

28. A system for validating a directory query initiated by a second subscriber served from a second messaging server that has received a message from a first subscriber served by a first messaging server and wishes to respond to the message, the system comprising:

two or more messaging servers, at least the first and second of which are (i) either located in different LATAs or in different geographical regions, (ii) share a common message transfer protocol, or (iii) are operated by different service providers;

a directory that stores the identity of the two or more messaging servers and responds to an inquiry from the second messaging server by providing at least the identity of the first messaging server;

a database, associated with the directory, that specifies rules governing the exchange of data between messaging servers; and

wherein, in response to the query from the second messaging server, the directory either validates or denies the proposed message transfer between the first and second messaging server.

29. A method for validating messaging transactions handled by two different messaging servers comprising:

(a) determining (i) a first identity code associated with the message initiator and (ii) a second identity code associated with the message recipient;

(b) providing the first and second identity codes to a database; and

(c) analyzing validation criteria associated with each of the first and second identity codes in order to determine the validity of the messaging transaction.

30. The method according to claim 29 in which the validation criteria comprise information selected from the group consisting of (1) the geographic location or regulatory status of a first messaging server that receives the message from the message initiator; (2) the geographic location or regulatory status of a second messaging server that receives the message from the first messaging server in order to forward the message to the messaging server; and (3) subscriber profile data describing whether the user initiating a selected messaging transaction and the recipient of the messaging transaction are authorized to complete the selected messaging transaction.

31. A validation method for use in a regional voicemail system comprising at least two different networks, the first operated by a first service provider, the second operated by a second service provider, whereby a data network couples the first and second networks to a messaging server, the method comprising:

- associating the identities of the message originator and recipient with the identities of an originating messaging server and a destination messaging server;
- comparing data describing the originating and destination voice messaging servers to determine whether the voice mail may be forwarded from the originating messaging server to the destination messaging server;
- sending a validation acknowledgment to the originating messaging server that the message may be sent; and
- forwarding the voice mail to the destination messaging server upon receipt of the validation acknowledgment.